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Syria's Role in International Terrorism

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Interagency Intelligence Memorandum
Memorandum to Holders

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NI IIM 85-10012
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MEMORANDUM TO HOLDERS NI IIM 85-10012

SYRIA'S ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

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Information available as of 25 February 1987 was used in the preparation of this Memorandum, which was approved for publication by the National Foreign Intelligence Board on that date.

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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
SCOPE NOTE	1
KEY JUDGMENTS	3
DISCUSSION	5
Syrian Involvement in Terrorism	5
Direct Involvement.....	5
Surrogate Support	6
Sponsorship of Abu Nidal	7
Other Syrian-Supported Groups.....	8
Syrian Relations With Libya and Iran.....	8
Support Infrastructure.....	9
The Assad Variable.....	9
Outlook	10

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SCOPE NOTE

This Memorandum to Holders of NI IIM 85-10012C, *Syria's Role in International Terrorism*, examines developments since publication of the Interagency Intelligence Memorandum in November 1985. It examines Syrian involvement in terrorist incidents—directly and through surrogates—and discusses the fallout from the revelations stemming from the trials of Syrian-supported terrorists in the fall of 1986. The Memorandum projects how Syrian-supported terrorism will evolve over the next year and assesses the likelihood of terrorist attacks against Western interests during that time frame. This Memorandum does not address Syria's deployment into Beirut in February 1987 or the subsequent Syrian-Hizballah clashes and their implications for Syrian terrorism policy.

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The Intelligence Community has some key intelligence gaps on Syria's role in terrorism. Most broadly, part of the time period under review in this Memorandum—the 90 days since Western sanctions were imposed—is too short to allow conclusive evidence of changes in Syrian patterns of behavior to emerge. More particularly, we lack information on the extent of Syria's role in Abu Nidal's selection of Western targets. We lack specific information on President Assad's direct knowledge and involvement in Syrian-sponsored terrorist planning. Political maneuvering at high levels of the Syrian Government at this time also complicated our analysis. These gaps and others preclude a comprehensive picture of Syria's role in terrorism and any recent shifts in the overall pattern of involvement. This Memorandum accordingly should be regarded as an interim finding.

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KEY JUDGMENTS

Western sanctions intended to alter Syria's involvement in international terrorism have so far failed to produce any more than tactical changes in the patterns of Syrian behavior. Syria continues to have close ties to several terrorist groups and has not made significant progress in six key areas. It is very unlikely existing Western sanctions will change significantly Syrian behavior because Damascus regards terror as a vital tool of its foreign policy. An alternative view is that in light of Syria's traditional unresponsiveness to external pressure, the actions already taken by Damascus to repair its relationship with the West should in themselves be considered significant. Syria has been shown the costs of being held responsible for terrorism against the United States and Western Europe, and may be willing to take further steps. [REDACTED]

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Between publication of the Interagency Intelligence Memorandum (IIM) in November 1985 and the trials of Syrian-backed terrorists in London and West Berlin in the fall of 1986, Syria continued its role as a major sponsor of international terrorism and, for the first time since 1982, we detected direct involvement by Syrian personnel in terrorist operations:

- Syrian officials directly supervised attempts to blow up El Al aircraft in London and Madrid as well as the bombing of the German-Arab Friendship Union in West Berlin in the spring of 1986.
- The Syrian-backed Abu Nidal group took its terrorist campaign to a new level of anti-Western violence as attacks by the group in Rome, Vienna, Karachi, and Istanbul resulted in 57 fatalities, including seven US citizens.
- Syrian Air Force Intelligence eclipsed Military Intelligence in its involvement in terrorism outside Lebanon in 1986, directing the London and West Berlin operations, and performing liaison duties with several Turkish and Palestinian terrorist groups, including Abu Nidal. [REDACTED]

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During the past three months, however, Damascus has responded to Western political and economic pressures by making some changes in its terrorist policy. Damascus has been on the defensive since the United

¹ This view is held by the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency; the Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force; and the Director of Intelligence, Marine Corps. [REDACTED]

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Kingdom severed relations with Syria following the trial and conviction in London last October of Nizar Hindawi, the key operative in the first El Al bombing attempt:

- Syrian-supported groups have lowered their public profiles in Damascus. Damascus probably asked groups it supports to postpone operations in order to avoid further embarrassment. Moreover, we have not detected direct involvement in terrorism by Syrian personnel since the Hindawi trial.
- [] suggests that Syria has imposed stricter travel controls on the Abu Nidal group. However, such action probably is most related to the involvement of Abu Nidal organization personnel in fighting against the Syrian-backed Amal militia in the Lebanese "camps war."
- Assad reportedly froze all foreign operations by Air Force Intelligence last December and may have begun to ease its chief Muhammad al-Khuli out of his post, although we are uncertain of al-Khuli's actual status or the reasons for any change in status.

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Nonetheless, we believe these actions by Assad—apparent concessions to the West—are primarily tactical and most likely only temporary. Syria continues to provide weapons, operational bases, safehaven, and terrorist training facilities to numerous terrorist groups, including Abu Nidal. Moreover, Military Intelligence is expected to assume the terrorist responsibilities of Air Force Intelligence. []

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We expect the current reduction in Syrian-sponsored terrorism will continue, particularly against US and West European targets, as long as Syria's first priority is to refurbish its international reputation and repair relations with the West. Terrorism, however, remains an integral part of Syria's foreign policy, enabling Damascus to wield influence in the Middle East, and it is not likely to abandon this weapon against Israeli and moderate Arab targets. We believe Syria will use terrorism whenever it calculates that the potential benefits of attacking Israel, undermining movement in the Middle East peace process, exerting control over the Palestinian movement, pressuring neighboring states, (including NATO member Turkey), and maintaining its influence in Lebanon outweigh the political risks. If US policies collide with Syrian goals in these areas, Damascus will target US interests as it has done in the past. []

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